99

ADYAR PAMPHLETS
No. 151

9
1990
4 - AUG 1951

# The Future of the Theosophical Society

BY

DR. ANNIE BESANT, P.T.S.

Theosophical Publishing House
Adyar, Madras, India

QM
N31

# WORKS BY DR. ANNIE BESANT

| Title | Binding | | Rs. | A. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ancient Ideals in Modern Life | Wrappers | ... | 1 | 0 |
| | Boards | ... | 1 | 4 |
| | Cloth | ... | 2 | 0 |
| The Ancient Wisdom. With Index | Cloth | ... | 3 | 12 |
| | Paper | ... | 2 | 10 |
| Annie Besant, an Autobiography | | ... | 6 | 6 |
| Annie Besant's Speeches and Writings on Indian Questions | | ... | 3 | 0 |
| Avataras | Paper | ... | 0 | 14 |
| | Boards | ... | 1 | 2 |
| Basis of Morality | | ... | 0 | 6 |
| The Bhagavad-Gita. Translation only Lambskin | | ... | 4 | 8 |
| | Wrappers | ... | 0 | 12 |
| | Cloth | ... | 1 | 8 |
| Devanagari Text and Translation. | Wrappers | | 0 | 4 |
| In Handsome Blue Leather and Gold | | ... | 2 | 8 |
| Birth of New India | | ... | 1 | 0 |
| Brahmavidya: Divine Wisdom | Cloth | ... | 1 | 8 |
| Britain's Place in the Great Plan | | ... | 1 | 8 |
| Bruno, Giordano | | ... | 0 | 4 |
| Buddhist Popular Lectures | Boards | ... | 0 | 8 |
| The Changing World | Wrappers | ... | 2 | 0 |
| Civilization's Deadlocks and the Keys. | Boards | | 1 | 4 |
| Death and After | Wrappers | ... | 0 | 12 |
| | Cloth | ... | 1 | 2 |
| Dharma | Boards | ... | 0 | 8 |
| | Cloth | ... | 0 | 10 |
| The Doctrine of the Heart | Paper | ... | 0 | 6 |
| | Cloth | ... | 1 | 0 |
| Duties of the Theosophist | Boards | ... | 1 | 0 |
| | Cloth | ... | 1 | 4 |
| Esoteric Christianity or the Lesser Mysteries | | | 1 | 8 |
| Evolution and Man's Destiny | | ... | 1 | 8 |
| The Evolution of Life and Forms | Boards | ... | 0 | 12 |
| | Cloth | ... | 1 | 4 |
| Evolution and Occultism. (Essays and Addresses, Vol. III.) | | ... | 2 | 10 |

ADYAR PAMPHLETS

No. 151

4 AUG 1931

# The Future of the Theosophical Society

BY

DR. ANNIE BESANT, P.T.S.

July 1931

THEOSOPHICAL PUBLISHING HOUSE
ADYAR, MADRAS, INDIA

*Annual Subscription:* Rs. 2 or 3sh. or 75 cents
*Single Copy:* As. 2

QM
N31

TAMIL NADU ARCHIVES LIBRARY
ACC. No.
7151
EGMORE, MADRAS-600 008

# THE FUTURE OF THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY[1]

FRIENDS:

We have met here this morning as members of a world-wide society, the Theosophical Society. I have often wished that we had translated that name into English, and we should then have had as our name the "Society of the Divine Wisdom". We should thus have avoided a danger. For when a Society has existed for many years, there is always a certain peril that it will become crystallized in its thought and in its methods of activity. If that danger should overbear freedom of thought and of discussion, then the Society will become a danger to the progress of the world, instead of being an inspiration. We cannot avoid facing that danger, as we go on year after year: but, to recognize it is really half the victory.

We must everywhere, in our influence upon the world and our influence over our young members, remember that the life of the Society depends on its

[1] Lecture delivered at the Theosophical Convention, Benares, December, 1930.

remaining a Society in which thought is entirely free, and frank discussion is encouraged. Anyone who has—as he or she may believe—an idea, a truth, to give to the world, should be encouraged in its delivery, so that every member may exercise his own free judgment as to the truth or error which that idea conveys. The intellect of man is, or should be, the great motive power in the world of thought; and that intellect, if it is to act usefully upon the world, must make the common good, the common welfare of the world at large, its inspiration to activity.

There is but one thing, as you know, which must be accepted by every one who comes into the Theosophical Society, and that is the existence of Universal Brotherhood as a law of Nature. But, merely to profess acceptance of Universal Brotherhood is a small part of our work. Every member of the Society should be doing his utmost to *live* Universal Brotherhood, to carry it out in his ordinary everyday life, not only to use it as a great light, a light thrown on the road of right thinking, but also to realize that Brotherhood must embody itself in brotherly activity, if it is to be worthy of its name.

Hence, it is well to be awake to the dangers which threaten every movement that goes on year after year, decade after decade. The great danger which threatens every such movement is what we may call crystallization; putting it in a common

phrase, the getting into a particular rut, because it is found more easy to run along a pathway which is already made, than to strike out pathways which are new. But, the vitality of any Society, as regards intellect, must depend on the intellect being open to the entry of new thought, new ideas, judging each entirely by its value, as it does or does not subserve the welfare of all, ultimately of the world at large. We must then be on our guard against becoming crystallized. That is the first danger. We must encourage the expression of new thought, the open expression of any new idea. Every intellectual advance is initiated by an individual, by some one person who has caught a glimpse of a truth, from an angle differing from that of others who are around him.

We must make it easy for new thought to express itself in the Theosophical Society; we must encourage it actively. For instance, we should welcome it in our Lodges. In a Lodge, any subject of interest which may be brought up should be thoroughly discussed from every angle of thought of which the members are capable. To think freely is a very difficult thing, especially as the Society gets older and older. It is easier to go along a trodden path than to cut out a new way through the boundless forest of truth. We must make it easy for our members to express a new thought. The mind has—as you must know from your own thinking—a very strong tendency to

repeat itself, to make a difference which, when you come to analyze it, is only a difference of words, not a difference of thought. I consider that the life of the T. S. depends very largely on the encouragement that we give to thought which is new, however repugnant it may happen to be to some idea that we already hold, that we may cherish as being very noble. It is true what Milton once said: "Let Truth and Falsehood grapple. Who ever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?" You must lay stress on the words "free and open". You must not have a man shouted down by a number of opponents, who are too prejudiced to listen to some new thought that he may wish to express. Encourage him even if he be only groping. Neither must you be too ready to accept a new thought until you have carefully examined it, analyzed it as far as your intellectual power goes, tested it, seen that it is what has been called "right thinking". For, there are so many things that lead us astray from right thinking, such as old prejudices we may have; so many of our prejudices are inherited, or spring from the conventions that surround us, which become, so many of them, dangers rather than helps to the usefulness of our Society.

And regarding this, there is one answer that I read many many years ago by a great man who put it in the form of a question that was asked him by God. If God, he said, were to ask him: "Which

will you have, absolute truth or the search for truth?" his answer would be: "I choose the Search for Truth, for, Absolute Truth is for Thee alone." That is the answer of a man who seems to me to be as wise as he was humble. Absolute truth is illimitable, has no boundaries, no kind of barrier which should not be faced and over-climbed.

Where you doubt, suspend your judgment; do not reject the idea. Keep an open mind continually, a mind that tries to see whether any belief needs fresh revision, so as to adapt itself to new circumstances. See whether your beliefs are becoming habitual, lifeless, instead of throbbing with new intellectual life.

Let us realize that as our Society grows older and older, we have to be on our guard against a special danger—the repetition of a phrase which is not really a living expression of our own thought, and thus let ideas grow into dogmas. Now, a dogma means an opinion which rests on authority. Examine it. Do not accept it blindly, without a very careful examination of the credentials, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, which are shown by the person who propounds it.

One great duty we old people have to the youth of a country is to remember that the forward advance of a country depends on the thinking of its youth. Expressions of new thought by the young should not be hindered in any way by the older people. Elders may ask questions to help the

young thinker, leading him to test the value of his thought, but it should not be repressed by authority. Let it be considered, even encouraged to go out into the world to make its own way, or to fail to make it, according to its real value. What we call a mistake is, as Ford pointed out, a lack of experience merely, and the lack is supplied by the so-called mistake. Youth is necessary for the continuing life and growth of the Theosophical Movement.

Then, there is another danger which may be regarded as more contentious than the one noted, and that is fear. We need fearlessness. It is true that danger sometimes exercises a sort of fascination for some people, and this dulls the purely intellectual judgment. Yet this may not be an essential part of a thought, but attractive from its outer appearance. Nor must we fear to suspend our judgment, and to say so frankly. There is no necessity that we should express an opinion on everything; but it is vitally important that we should have some great central principles that guide our life. But even these we should not fear to re-examine from time to time, in case other outside circumstances, or our own youth, rather than our own growth by evolution, should bring about the possibility of some fresh angle of vision which we feel has a right to careful examination.

There are some ideas which seem to me to be vital to the growth of the Theosophical Society.

Personally, I consider that the growth of the Theosophical Society very largely depends on the existence of a proportion of the members who believe strongly in the existence of the Masters; but these must never try to enforce that opinion on others, while, at the same time, they are always ready to give the reasons for their own strong belief. The moment any idea falls back on authority as a reason for blind acceptance, that moment you should begin to suspect that authority. Truth should be able to face every difficulty, to try to meet every question; and if one is unable to meet a question, we ought frankly to say that we are not able at present to decide in favour of a definite opinion. We ought to examine and re-examine our convictions, being always ready to listen to arguments against them, and to weigh those arguments fairly and without prejudice, as far as we can. It is quite possible that we are not yet sufficiently developed to weigh the value of a thing at first sight. We feel a certain repugnance to weighing it fairly in the balance of the intellect; but, unless we try to examine and re-examine our convictions, we shall check our intellectual growth.

There is one phrase which I very often quote from the Hebrew Scriptures, because to me it has an enormous importance, whether you put it in an allegorical form, such as is sometimes used for its expression, or whether you put it in ordinary plain and simple language. Take, for instance, the

striking illustration in allegorical form of the thinker occupied in the search for God: "If I ascend up to heaven, Thou art there"—that seems natural enough; but "If I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there also". That is put in what I may call an allegorical form; but, it contains a profound truth. The only thing that enables a falsehood to live is the fragment of truth that the falsehood contains. A very well known Hindu Scripture says that "truth alone continues; falsehood passeth away". In matters of enormous importance to ourselves or, still more, to others, we must be scrupulously careful to exclude, as far as we possibly can, our own preconceptions, our own inherited ideas; to examine them and to see how far they are our own; or are the mere echo of the thinkings of others.

There is never any danger in examining and re-examining a truth. It comes out the more illuminating the more we test it by each new light. Hence, we should, every one of us, be careful, especially with those over whom we may have some authority, either from age or from experience, to test and retest our intellectual and emotional conclusions, to give to every idea propounded to us its fair weight. Some problems you may decide very quickly. Some, though of no use to yourself, may be useful to other people. Now and then, in the Hebrew Scriptures to which I just alluded, you have one of these deep thoughts

flashing out; "The Divine Wisdom," we are told, "mightily and sweetly ordereth *all things*." So that everything is worth examining from the very fact of its existence by virtue of a truth, however fragmentary, that it may contain. Or again: "Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" Does not that suggest that evil is only imperfect good? That it will grow into good?

Keeping that as a rule of life, we are likely to avoid prejudices to some extent, and I am inclined to say: examine every new idea which comes to you, which appeals to you or repels you. Each is growing; do not reject it without consideration; even if you cannot see in it anything useful or good, you will fulfil your duty by leaving it on one side. We cannot, without danger of error, make our own knowledge, our own thought, the measure for the truth that another may have glimpsed. When there is an opinion that is repugnant to us, we should look into it the more carefully, and see first whether our personal repugnance is not making a barrier to a fair examination, or whether only perhaps it is repeating some old idea in a new form of words.

Freedom of thought, then, is vital for the future of the Theosophical Society. Encourage discussion; listen to it fairly and patiently; be willing to test your own opinion again. You might have grown between the time when you formed an opinion and your present stage of consciousness. It does not

follow that, because it is true under one set of circumstances, it is necessarily true under another set of circumstances. A certain congruity is necessary before we should act upon a thought.

The other main danger that we have to avoid, I think, is letting the superiority of our own belief in a particular truth that we hold, lessen the keenness of the analysis that should enter into the examination, and in this way carefully exclude it, even if cognate to the subject under discussion. There are some beliefs we have which are so useful to us, that some of us think that infallibly they must be useful to every one. We are a little inclined to force them unduly. Whether a truth is useful to a person or not is determined by his own stage of consciousness; whether he can respond to it or not, that is the real test. If he cannot respond to it, either he has passed beyond it, or has not yet grown up to its height. Above all else, let us never discourage the free thinking of a brother. Let his thought go its own way, unless you can add to it a helpful idea. It may be that the holder is struggling after a fragment of truth enveloped in a husk of error; that sometimes a truth, the most difficult to find, is the most valuable when found. Let us, in thinking of the future of the Society, make freedom of thought within it an essential condition.

There is another point which is very much more debatable than those mentioned, and that is when

we like an opinion very strongly which is congruous to our own, but lessen its value in expression, because we have a certain prejudice lurking in the mind. It may be a national prejudice, it may be an inherited prejudice, it may be the general force of opinion all round us which dulls our perception of an error. Thus, it all comes back really to the idea : "Keep an open mind."

There is one point that arises that I think I can quite frankly mention to you, that I once heard put by a Master, when He said, that if people held what may be a true idea, but one which would not be suitable to the person to whom it was expressed, you might hinder that person instead of helping him. It arose out of a curious discussion whether it was a good thing for people to see both sides of a question. Most people would say hastily: "Certainly it is. Let us always help people to see both sides." The idea which was put forth was: "Suppose an ordinary person were to see both sides quite equally, so that each of them has a similar attraction or repulsion for him, then he probably would not act at all. That is an idea of the value of one-sidedness that you might think over." There is a deep truth in it. It is quite possible to be inactive, because you see both sides either so imperfectly, or so very perfectly, that the mind fails to perform its real function of thought, the direction of activity. It might paralyze instead of guide. It struck me so much, because, I had

7151
EGMORE, MADRAS

not thought of that particular difficulty. When one comes to think of it, one sees that a certain amount of one-sidedness is necessary for action, except in the case of the perfect. It would be, for others, like putting equal weights into the balance of a weighing-machine.

Test your thought in every way possible; you cannot do it perfectly, I know; none of us can. But, use your utmost discrimination, especially if you know that the person who propounds a statement is very much more advanced in his knowledge than you are. We must, as a matter of fact, accept many things on the authority of the expert. We are unable to go into everything from the beginning by experiments made by ourselves; in that way, there grows to be a certain body of accepted truths, but even with those, I think we should examine ourselves to see whether some imperfection in ourselves is not our difficulty in accepting a truth presented to us.

For a Society like the Theosophical, keenness of intellectual perception is of enormous importance. There are so many Theosophical teachings which fascinate us naturally and inevitably. I do not think that any of Krishnaji's many valuable teachings is more valuable than his exhortation to examine everything before you accept it. If you find you cannot understand it with your best efforts, wait until you grow a little more, and try again. Keep an open door, even though it be risky. But

take care what kinds of thought they are which are coming through the open door, and are establishing themselves as pieces of permanent furniture in your mind. An idea may be true when it came in, but it may come into contact with something in you which diminishes and destroys its present value for you.

So, let us stand in the Society for complete Free Thought. I do not say there is no risk in it; there is. But the risk is a lesser risk than the acceptance of everything, unless the authority relied upon is that of One who is infallible. We may take authority as a guide to experiment; but I do not think that we do wisely to take it as an authority for action, unless we have tested our own capacity to judge it, and are not overpowered by some fascination it may have, possibly because it confirms a prejudice of our own. That is one question that you may well discuss at present, and that is the reason why I am speaking about it.

There is one other question that I would ask you to think over very carefully, and that is a question which to me is of vital importance for the future of the Society: "What is your own attitude to the Masters?" If you have really thought over that as strongly and as carefully as you are able to do, if you arrive at a decision, or if you do not, have you the courage to say frankly to yourself: "I have—or, I have not—sufficient evidence, either

to convince me of the existence of the Masters, or to enable me to say that They do not exist"? It is a far better method to cultivate the suspension of judgment than to deny too hastily. The question arises for those of us who believe in Them, or know Them. If we know Them, and if we find that knowledge beneficial to us, we should not, even then, try to impose it on anybody who does not want it. But also we should never withhold our testimony from fear of ridicule, from that kind of fear which does not appear in its own ugly guise, but only as a "wise caution". The existence of the Masters is such a vital question that it seems to me unwise to leave it untested, without examining it to the very utmost of our power, and re-examining again later on, when we may hope we have grown somewhat more. If we know it, I think then, without unduly pressing it on anyone, we should, if the question arises, very quietly say that we know of Their existence, and quite frankly and readily answer the question: "Do you know of your own judgment, of your own experience, or only on the authority of someone whom you think superior to yourself?" It is better, I think, to wait, without coming to a full decision, for the time when no lurking doubts remain in the heart. If They exist, your belief or non-belief makes no difference to Them. But it makes an enormous difference to you. They do not press Themselves on anyone. Probably you know that beautiful

picture, in which the figure of the Christ is standing at a closed door and knocks. You may have observed in the picture that there have grown across the lower part of the closed door a number of thorns and prickly growths of the jungle. It is worth while always to see whether we have a jungle in our own minds which has shut out a Great One; that we do not wish to believe, because the implications of that belief would make demands which we are not ready to answer. We should do well to examine whether it is not that kind of an inner reluctance, which arises from the possible implications, which is the unworthy cause of our inability to believe. Almost above all other questions, this question as to the existence of the Masters seems to me one for which we should ever be seeking an answer, or have come possibly to a temporary decision upon one side or the other. That it has tremendous inspiration there is no doubt; that inspiration may grow into fanaticism, seeing only one side of the case. If that is so, it is better to seek for more evidence, and not to let the mere fascination carry you away.

I do not for a moment hide from you, or wish to hide, that my devotion to my Master is the dominant motive power in my mind and heart. It is so, because from experience, which has now lasted for a little more than half my life, I have had the joy of knowing what it is to live with Them. That that will expand and increase, I have no

doubt. It is the ruling motive in my life for service.

Every one had better make his choice. No one has a right to dictate to another. Only this I can say: it is my own experience that the more I have believed in Them, the more I have found that I understand, and that I serve. I propose to cling to that belief, and only to put it by if I find it hampering further service. But I close with the statement: "Do not believe, because someone else believes; out of your own knowledge you should judge." That was the advice of the Lord Buddha, the most illuminated so far of our humanity. The longer you are in the Society, you love it the more. That is my experience.

TAMIL NADU ARCHIVES LIBRARY
ACC. No. 7151
EGMORE, MADRAS-600 008

Printed by A. K. Sitarama Shastri, at the Vasanta Press,
Adyar, Madras.